

THE STUDY OF MAN

SOCIAL MOBILITY AGAIN—AND ELITES

A European View

HERBERT LUETHY

IN THE article "Class and Opportunity in Europe and the United States" (COMMENTARY, December 1954), Seymour Martin Lipset and Natalie Rogoff, comparing recent findings on social mobility in the United States on the one hand, and in a number of European countries on the other, defined "social mobility" as the ease with which an individual can pass from one social class into another—or rather the ease with which he can quit his parents' socio-economic class and enter a new one. To compare the results of the different inquiries, it was necessary for the authors to simplify their statistical data and categories to a very great extent. For there are some thirty-six ways of measuring social mobility. Should one or several generations be taken into account? Just males or both sexes? Should the purview of the study be limited to fathers and sons alone, or should it embrace wider relationships? Then, too, the number, character, and ranking of the categories employed necessarily make a difference.

In the Lipset-Rogoff study, to facilitate comparison, the number of categories was reduced

to three: "farm," "manual," and "non-manual," which correspond almost exactly to the groups called "primary," "secondary," and "tertiary" in the studies of Colin Clark in England and of Jean Fourastié in France. Let me reproduce the most important table from the Lipset-Rogoff study, which makes a comparative summary of social mobility data for the United States, France, and Germany:

Father's Occupation	Son's Occupation		
	Non-Manual	Manual	Farm
<i>United States</i>			
Non-manual: 100%	71	25	4
Manual: 100%	35	61	4
Farm: 100%	23	39	38
<i>France</i>			
Non-manual: 100%	73	18	9
Manual: 100%	35	55	10
Farm: 100%	16	13	71
<i>Germany</i>			
Non-manual: 100%	80	20	—
Manual: 100%	30	60	10
Farm: 100%	12	19	69

Thus, the third horizontal line of the table shows that of 100 sons of American farmers, 38 remained in agriculture and 39 went into the manual and 23 into the non-manual occupations.

THIS mass shift of the sons of American farmers to manual and non-manual occupations is without parallel in Western Europe. The number of farm workers is decreasing at an incomparably faster rate in America than in Europe. But aside from this fact—which is not at all to be explained by the greater "openness" of American social groups but by "the ability of the expanding American urban economy to absorb much larger numbers of the

IN THIS critique of the "very American" science of sociology, the Swiss historian and political analyst, HERBERT LUETHY, raises the question of the pertinence of the discipline's statistical methods and laws to the problems presented by European society. Is sociology attempting, presumptuously, to answer problems properly in the domain of history, economics, or social philosophy? Mr. Luethy, a familiar contributor to COMMENTARY, is author of the recently published *France Against Herself* (Praeger). He last appeared in these pages with "What Western 'Colonialism' Gave to Asia" (June).

sons and daughters of the American countryside"—the similarity of the statistics is striking. It appears that France and the United States do not differ in the slightest when it comes to the *ease* with which one can shift from manual to non-manual work—meaning by "ease" the absence of all "artificial" (social and traditional) barriers to advancement by personal ability and energy. The authors verify this conclusion by comparing several European and American studies of particular localities in which they found no marked difference between the "social mobility" of the population of Aarhus (Denmark) and that of Indianapolis (Indiana), or for that matter between the frequency of intermarriage between different social groups in Bavaria and in Philadelphia. The conclusion is clear: these tables "refute any claim that social mobility in the United States is on the whole markedly greater than in Europe, where family status allegedly limits positions open to sons."

At first sight the result is surprising. One is gratified to learn that our "old" European societies have remained as mobile as the "young" society of the United States. But then a thought comes to trouble one's complacency. What if the very same sociologists, with the same baggage of methods and measuring instruments, were to go to the Indies or to Peru, or back in time from the New to the Old China, from Soviet Russia to the land of the Czars of the 19th or even of the 13th century, or to ancient Greece? What then? Perhaps they would always turn up with the same coefficient of "social mobility," the variations being always attributable not to the "closed" or "open" character of classes, but to the economic character and over-all composition of society—for it is evident that in a preponderantly agricultural country, for example, with a population composed nine-tenths of farmers, nine out of ten sons of farmers will perforce become farmers, too, independently of the strength of "caste exclusiveness."

When the interpretation of statistical evidence ends with results that give the lie to accepted views, it is well to be critical of accepted views, but it is also a good idea to look somewhat more closely at the statistics. Now there are not only thirty-six *ways* of measuring social mobility; there are as many *types* of social mobility itself. There are slow evolutions, continuing for several generations, and there are sudden leaps; one may study the rise and fall

of families and groups, or the individual careers of self-made men; one can change one's class by acquiring wealth, or learning a profession, or by marriage. One type of social mobility can be charted on a map, another in the social register, and a third on the family tree, and the social scientist embraces all these varieties of social movement in one category and generalization at the risk of emptying his results of any precise meaning.

THE very notion of "social mobility" has an American origin. The maintenance of a high degree of "social fluidity" has been an obsession of American sociologists ever since the conquest of the frontier and the winning of the West, when extensive had to make way for intensive expansion. The question, as raised, was whether America would be able to maintain its dynamism, or would it slowly be transformed into a "rigid," "stratified" society, with "static" classes, on the order of Europe? The notion of mobility, then, by its very origin, is invested with a positive meaning; a high degree of social mobility is proof of health, youth, and prosperity; a decline in mobility is a symptom of social sclerosis. As long as there is mobility—no matter in what direction—all is well.

But is this necessarily true? Do not disorder and decadence also imply social movement without signifying social health? Are we to suppose that the rate of social mobility at the time of the great migrations of the European peoples was less than that of the period of the Crusades? On reflection, indeed, it would not be so surprising if social mobility in the doddering and sclerotic Old World turned out to be greater than in young and bustling America. If the United States, in a mere two decades, has known booms and busts, great internal migrations, the displacements of economic centers from one region to another, a New Deal, and a general rise in the standard of living, Europe in the same space of time has known total war, revolutions, deportations, genocide, purges and counter-purges, inflations, the slow or sudden ruin of whole social classes, expropriations, nationalizations and denationalizations, deep depressions and startling recoveries—and all this accompanied by the rupture of economic ties between Eastern and Western Europe and the splitting of the Continent into two economic rumps, the decline or fall of European empires, and the lowering of Europe's economic position in the world. Each new chapter of this

tumultuous and often insensate story has seen new masters and owners come forward, and the old take their places in the ranks of the dispossessed.

IF OUR statistically-minded sociologists were to compare the "coefficients of social mobility" of the "inter-class movement" in the United States, land of economic dynamism, with those in Western Germany, which has had to "digest" eight million refugees from the East (one uprooted and declassed newcomer for every five or six inhabitants), and were then obliged to conclude, on the basis of the figures, that the two societies were equally "vital," the insufficiency of a merely statistical account of European social reality would be plain for all to see. Moreover, the behavior of the European "average man," of whatever country and social class, would often actually seem to be a defensive reaction against too rapid and unsettling a rate of "social mobility." The constant obsession of the European, nowadays, is with security and stability. By placing himself under the protection of trade unions or the state, he wishes to secure himself against all risks. Social immobility is not his nightmare, it is his dream.

Then what meaning is there to this abstract notion of "social mobility"? What characterizes American society in its "postwar revolution" is not so much the passage of large numbers of individuals from one class to another, but rather (1) the social ascent of whole classes that previously were at the bottom of the heap, (2) a general rise in the standard of living, and (3) the multiplication of opportunities open to individuals at every level of society. Within this general movement of society as a whole, there is also a movement of individuals from class to class; this may be an interesting phenomenon, especially for the light it sheds on the relative "openness" of the various social groups, but is of quite secondary significance. In a society that is *not* itself expanding, the "coefficient of social mobility" may be the same as in one that is, while having the very opposite meaning: instead of progress, it may signify social disorder and savage internecine struggle.

The general movement of economy and population, the changing proportions of professional and social groups—like the oft-mentioned movement from production to organization and distribution, from "primary" (farm) to "secondary" (manual) and "tertiary" (non-manual)

work, a movement fundamental to modern industrial societies—is best measured by the more classic means of population censuses and production, employment, and revenue statistics. American sociology has heaped refinement on refinement, to the point of isolating "pure social mobility": i.e., that degree or margin of mobility which exists independently of the historical expansion or contraction of the economy's occupational structure, and is thus not due to over-all changes in job opportunities, but entirely to individual causes. But such a distinction seems quite artificial, for the interdependence of the two phenomena would seem quite evident.

THIS coefficient of "absolute" social mobility, which has the air of a great novelty, takes us back, in fact, to the old problem of "elites" that has so long occupied social philosophers. This problem is constituted by that minority of "born chiefs and pioneers" who do not inherit positions of leadership but win their way to them. The freedom and rapidity with which such "elites" climb to the top of the social ladder is, according to Wilfredo Pareto and his disciples, the criterion by which societies are to be judged as innovating or conservative, "open" or "closed."

Elites, those "children of original character and initiative," the ferment of all social change, seem, according to M. Tritesch (in *Preuves*, September 1952), who bases his argument on inquiries conducted by UNESCO, to make up a "probably biological" constant of 5 per cent in all human groups. It is, to be sure, interesting to attack this old problem with instruments of a new and scientific precision, but unhappily one must question the precision itself of these instruments. One cannot but be suspicious of laws, "biological" or what have you, that emerge from the files of "social research projects" by a miracle of strict interpretation of the imprecise and ambiguous data usually accumulated by such projects. The wildest mystifications, like the fascist theories of "racial elites," have been constructed out of such pseudo-scientific materials.

There is doubtless a molecular movement inside the social body that goes on independently of the general movement of society, even when the latter seems at a standstill. But what we have here are "exceptional cases" that are not part of established social groupings; if society sets too many obstacles in the way of

careers outside the regular channels to eminence, exceptional individuals will turn against its institutions. This is a marvelous theme for social philosophy, but hardly one that statistical tables and curves can cope with. It is the very character of exceptional cases to escape classification; they represent a "percentage" that can never be determined. One can only measure safely what is, not what might be. Sociology can, at least approximately, note down a certain number of careers falling outside the regular pattern, but to try to uncover the multiple and often secret factors that cause individuals to take special and exceptional paths—among which factors innate genius is certainly neither the sole nor the numerically most important one—is to venture into the field of the unmeasurable and violate the limits of the statistical method—it is to succumb, in short, to that delirium for putting everything into statistics which characterizes certain kinds of sociological inquiry.

All the more so, since the notion of an elite is essentially ambiguous. There is not just *one* elite. There are potentially as many elites as there are possible social situations. There are elites of war and elites of peace, of revolution and of social stability; there are elites among the police and the bureaucrats, among economic planners and among the businessmen of a free

enterprise system; there are elites of gangsters and elites of artists, of violence and of civilization. Every society, giving free rein to some, represses others, in accordance with its system of values and the stability of its structure. It may well be that the percentage of "initiators," and the freedom of movement (degree of social mobility) allowed this minority, are constants of history and remain the same in every society. But then there would have to be some sort of "indeterminate constant," thanks to which human society escapes subjection to mathematical laws and finds its necessary minimum of freedom.

American sociology was conceived and developed as a useful, indeed utilitarian, science, in response to the New World's concern to integrate all the heterogeneous contributions of the many traditions, races, and nations making up the American people; it resolutely became a science of social adaptation, a type of "social engineering," and its constant and highly developed inquiry into social mobility has the aim of controlling the temperature of the melting pot lest it fall below the boiling point. But when its methods are applied to problems as different as those raised by European society, as in the Lipset-Rogoff study in part, there is a serious danger of its elaborate findings turning out to be very nearly pointless.